

Father Christmas

by DixonHill67

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Summary: An unusual guest joins the family for Christams Eve. This is now the "digitally remastered" version of this story.

Father Christmas

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>
Author: Dixonhill

>
Written: April 2000, originally. It was revised November/December 2001.

>
Rating: PG

>
Setting: Christmas Eve 1987

>
Summary: An unusual guest joins the family for Christmas at 4247 Maplewood.

>
Author's Notes: I would be very remiss, indeed, if I failed to mention the group of elves who helped with the very necessary buffing and polishing of this story. I wish I had known them when I first wrote and posted this story.

>

>
1 Father Christmas

>
 Francine Desmond was running scared. She took another deep breath and ducked around yet another corner. Eight years. Eight long years that she had been with the Agency and it had never, never, been this . . .bad.

>
She slipped out into the hallway. If she kept moving, maybe a plan for escape would present itself. She paused briefly in her flight and glanced back down the hall.

>
"Still there. How am I supposed to lose this guy?" she muttered.

>
Then she saw. Stepping out of the elevator, salvation in a green cardigan. Well, she thought, maybe not salvation, but a step in the right direction.

>
"Merry Christmas, Francine!" Amanda King greeted her over the armload of packages she was carrying down from the Q Bureau.

>
"Amanda!" Francine gushed the other woman's name. "You look like you could use some help. Let me. Walk. With. Me." Francine forcibly took Amanda's arm and turned with her back into the Agency's main hallway.

>
"Francine, please, let go," Amanda tried to step away, "you're going to make me . . ."

>
The packages began to topple. First a gift, then one cookie tin, then another slid from Amanda's embrace to the floor. Francine grabbed at them frantically, certain all was now lost. Unfortunately, her actions upset the precarious balance in Amanda's arms further and, within seconds, all of the packages scattered across the floor. Both women knelt to gather them.

>
"Sorry, Amanda," Francine said as she turned to pick up the last tin of sugar cookies. Rising, Francine found herself eye to eye not with Amanda King, but with him, the enemy, the terror . . . "Beeman . . . Go! Go away." Francine pulled away as the overly persistent Agent Beeman grabbed her forearm. An unusually flustered Francine turned to Amanda, who was now slightly behind her, imploring her with a look.

>
"Francine," Beeman slurred, "you were made for me. Come help me go over my notes for my Casual Surveillance class. And I do mean casual." Beeman's hand slid up Francine's arm once more. She jerked away in disgust, dropping some of Amanda's packages.

>
"Beeman," Amanda said softly, pulling the amorous agent away from Francine, "I think Francine was made for everyone but you. Now, why don't you come and help me pass out these cookies to everyone. I have a special package just for you. Come on."

>
As the two turned into the bullpen, Amanda turned back toward Francine, mouthing the word "Sorry." Francine stared in shock, both at the comment and at Amanda's ease in handling Beeman.

>
Francine knelt once again to gather the remaining packages. A strong hand reached out to help her rise -- a hand that was attached to the second shock of the day.

>
"Lee? What are you doing here?" Francine hadn't expected Stetson to descend from his aerie at all today. She knew, from too many years' experience, that Christmas and the Scarecrow had never been on very close terms.

>
"I work here, Francine," Lee Stetson returned with a smile as he took most of the packages from her. "Aren't these Amanda's?" he queried.

>
"Yeah, well, Amanda helped me out with a little cease and desist action a few minutes ago. I'd rather give her some time to wrap it up before I catch up to her."

>
"Ah . . ." Lee grinned, realization dawning, "Beeman's off to an early start, huh?"

>
Francine nodded morosely.

>
"Come on, let's go into the party. Or should I go back upstairs and get my baseball bat first?"

>
"Very funny, Scarecrow. But you still haven't answered my question. What are you doing down here today?"

>
"It's Christmas Eve, Francine. Why shouldn't I go to the party?"

>
"You seldom have before, Lee." Francine fished for a more complete answer.

>
"Maybe times are changing. Come on." Lee took the remaining packages in his left arm and guided Francine through the door with his right, nodding to the uniformed guards on the way into the bullpen.

>
Lee scanned the room, hoping to catch Amanda's eye. He found her

just outside the door to Billy's office with Beeman still in tow. Francine was scanning the crowd of intelligence operatives as well, hoping not to catch Beeman's eye. Since Amanda was preparing to knock on Billy's door and Beeman was facing the bullpen, neither Lee's nor Francine's hope was realized.

>
"Franc . . .fran . . .ccine, you know you wa . . .a . . .ant me," Beeman slurred as he moved toward her.

>
"Uh oh, gotta go." Francine ducked behind Lee's tall form and began crawling among the desks. She had never heard anyone, not even the one drink wonder Beeman, slur quite so loudly. She began to think she would never live this Christmas down.

>
Amanda turned toward Lee and shrugged as Billy opened his door. Francine was on her knees, working her way back to the exit. Lee took Beeman by the shoulders as he approached and forced eye contact.

>
"Beeman, buddy," Lee spoke loudly, "I heard Francine say she was headed down to Crypto. Dunton down there makes the best eggnog around. You should go check it out."

>
Francine froze when she heard Lee's words. She moved around a desk facing away from the main doors, praying her unwanted suitor would take Lee's bait. She didn't move, she scarcely breathed, until she heard Amanda shout, "Good-bye, Beeman. Tell Dunton I said hello, please."

>
Billy walked over to Francine's hiding place. He chuckled as he gave his assistant a hand up.

>
"Coast is clear, Francine. I'll call down to Crypto and have somebody drive Beeman home."

>
"Thanks, Billy. You, too, Scarecrow." Francine smiled. "I owe you a drink."

>
"Actually you owe me dinner." Lee grinned. "But," he added as Amanda gave him a curious look, "I'm in no big hurry to collect." He returned her look with a wink and a smile that was hers alone.

>
Billy coughed and walked between Lee and Amanda, before their holiday cheer got the best of them. While Amanda knew he approved of their relationship, in theory, she was also certain that he appreciated that they went to a great deal of effort to keep it away from the office. She wondered if he knew how well he had played the apothecary to Lee's Romeo.

>
Amanda struggled to compose herself from the effects Lee's smile always had on her as Billy walked past. "Thank you, sir," she said to him quietly.

>
Lee approached Amanda cautiously with the remaining packages. He struggled to maintain a physical distance between them, naturally gravitating to her side whenever they were in the same room. He was oddly pleased to see the slight evidence of her own internal struggle play out across the features he loved so much.

>
"You . . .uh, you left these in the hall." He took a deep breath as he showed her the remaining packages.

>
"Thank you, Lee." Amanda smiled and bit lightly at her bottom lip, still trying to reassert control over the reactions Lee's very presence continued to stir within her. "Would you like to help me hand out the rest of these?"

>
"Sure, I love the smell of cookies in the morning. Come on, let's unload all of this."

>
As they made the circuit of the room, Amanda gave out cookies and small gifts to nearly every agent present, while Lee deflected snide remarks about his attendance at this annual event that he usually avoided. The couple approached Billy, now holding court behind a table laden with his wife's fruitcakes. Billy handed Amanda

one of the fruitcakes and slipped a dry erase marker in Lee's left hand.

>
"This is your idea of a Christmas present?" Lee looked at his boss quizzically.

>
"No, I just noticed that you hadn't written your name in for Christmas duty yet," Billy prodded. He pointed to the dry erase board in the corner that listed those agents who volunteered to take on any assignment that arose during the next two days. Billy would have preferred that all his agents had time off for Christmas, but the Agency's work continued regardless of holidays. Lee Stetson's was generally the first name on that board every year. Despite the obvious effects Amanda King had on his friend, Billy was still pleasantly surprised to not see Lee's name on the list.

>
"Oh . . . I . . . uh . . . I just figured I'd go ahead and take advantage of the time off this year, Billy. You know . . . watch a little football . . . eat some cookies . . . and fruitcake," he quickly picked up one of the little bundles. "It's about time somebody else got to rake in that holiday pay . . . I'm just trying to . . . you know . . ."

>
"I think I know, Scarecrow." Billy nodded as he looked first at Lee and then Amanda. "Merry Christmas, you two."

>
"Thank you, sir," Amanda blushed slightly as Lee suddenly found the carpet fascinating, "Merry Christmas to you, too."

>
Lee looked up and glanced toward the main doors. Francine, freed from Beeman's advances, was now working her wiles on an elderly gentleman Lee had never seen before. The man was tall, rather good-looking in a gray and faded sort of way, and impeccably dressed. That alone qualified him as Francine's type. Still, Lee couldn't help but think that this character was a little old even in Francine's book; the guy was seventy if he was a day, Lee thought. He watched the two talking for a few minutes, then saw Francine point toward him. The old man walked toward Lee and the others. Lee noticed his visitor's badge as well as two other strangers standing in the hallway beside the guards.

>
The two men outside bristled as Lee's gaze drifted over them. They eased inside the door and returned Lee's gaze with confident challenge.

>
The old man's eyes never strayed from Lee's face. He stopped and stood two feet from Lee, still staring. Not a word was given, not a question was asked, but Lee was certain that his measure was being taken. The two men were of equal height and Lee kept eye contact with this odd visitor, his poker face firmly in place. He felt as though he wanted to pass this stranger's inspection, but he wasn't about to give anything away unintentionally. Billy and Amanda stood uneasily, quietly watching the even more silent exchange.

>
"Well, I see you've met our resident rebel," Dr. Smyth's voice skulked from behind the visitor.

>
"Yes. Actually, I have," The visitor spoke clearly for someone of his advanced years and very softly. His tone was measured and even, the kind of voice that made you want to listen. He broke eye contact with Lee, almost regretfully, and turned to Amanda.

>
"And Mrs. . . . King, a pleasure to meet you as well." The visitor took Amanda's left hand in his right and softly kissed her knuckles.

>
Lee studied the carpet again. That pause was odd, he thought. Almost as though the old man had pulled all his secrets out with just a look.

>
"You seem to have me at a disadvantage, Mr. . . .?" Lee heard Amanda query the visitor.

>
"Just a visitor from abroad, King. Nothing to concern yourself with. Let's continue the tour, K?" Dr. Smyth gestured toward the doors.

>
"Dr. Smyth, thank you for your time. I have seen enough. Will you please instruct my associates to return to my hotel? I will arrange alternate transportation." The dismissal was clear. Billy smothered a grin at seeing Dr. Smyth being sent to his room like a child.

>
Dr. Smyth, however, was not so easily dismissed. He stood his ground, blowing cigarette smoke into the circle of faces before him. Amanda held her breath, not out of anticipation or fear, but out of annoyance at the smoke. Dr. Smyth was the most politely inconsiderate person she had ever known. She began to think he might have just met his match.

>
"Smythy, old boy," the visitor lightened his tone as if he really were speaking to a small child, "I have what I came for. I do not need to see any more of this facility. I have a mission to complete today, sir, and you are keeping me from it. Please carry out my instructions."

>
"Allies or not, 'old boy'," Dr. Smyth quietly fumed, "you can't go wandering around without an escort, K?"

>
"My mission involves giving information, Smythy. I don't intend to take any this time around, 'allies or not,'" the gentleman added wryly. "You have my word that I will stay in the company of one of your agents while I am here." The visitor permanently dismissed Dr. Smyth from his thoughts and turned to Amanda again.

>
"Mrs. . . .King." There's that pause again, thought Lee. "You and I have a mutual friend. When I mentioned I would be in Washington, she asked me to deliver some packages for her. Might I come visit you this evening?"

>
"Well . . . I guess. Who are these packages from?" Although Amanda certainly didn't need any more secrets in her home on Christmas Eve, she felt strangely drawn to this cultured, enigmatic gentleman. I must have a fetish for strange men with packages, she mused.

>
"Never fear, my dear. The packages are from Emily Farnsworth. They are Christmas gifts for you and your family. She thinks very highly of you."

>
"Oh, well, in that case, dinner's at six. We'd like you to join us, Mr. . . ." Amanda paused and glanced at Lee, who was still studying the carpet and shaking his head slightly. "I'm sorry; I didn't catch your name."

>
"You may call me Chaucer, for now." Lee looked up and exchanged a startled glance with Billy as Chaucer took Amanda's hand again. "I'll see you promptly at six, Mrs. . . . King."

>
"Mr. Stetson," Chaucer spoke quietly again, "I require your assistance." Chaucer smiled slightly as though his simple request was amusing, and resumed his scrutiny of Lee.

>
"Sure. What can I do for you, sir?" Lee's manner was now both more deferential and more suspicious toward the elderly visitor. Amanda found his shift odd.

>
"I need to go shopping, my boy. And I need to collect those aforementioned packages. You, my boy, are my alternate transportation. Come along," Chaucer commanded as he made his way toward the doors.

>
"I'll call you," Lee told Amanda as he hurriedly clasped her hand and then turned to follow Chaucer. As he approached Chaucer's small entourage, he gave them a look of guarded apprehension. Chaucer exchanged a few terse words with them and gestured Lee to follow him down the hall.

>
"Mr. Melrose," Amanda looked from the scene at the door to her boss, "what have I gotten myself into?"
>
"I think you'll be OK, Amanda," Billy replied. "Chaucer is the code name for the pre-eminent British spy master. I've never met him. I've never seen a picture of him. But the way he sent Dr. Smyth packing has me thinking that's him," Billy nodded toward the retreating figures of Chaucer and Lee.
>
"What do you think he wants with Lee?" Amanda asked quietly.

>
"I have no idea," Billy said, shaking his head.

>
~~~~~/\~~~~~

>
Several hours later, Amanda was at home basting her turkey. Her mother had prepared most of the dishes for Christmas Eve dinner ahead of time. All that remained would be to warm a few items and, of course, supervise the turkey on its way. At three o'clock she had plenty of time before anyone arrived. It was strange being in an empty house on Christmas Eve. Her mother and Aunt Lillian had gone to the store to pick up a few last minute items; there's always something forgotten until the last minute, Amanda mused. Joe and Carrie had taken the boys for the day and would return with them in time for dinner. And Lee . . . Lee still hadn't called. He'd been out with Chaucer for nearly five hours. She wasn't upset; Lee had said he would call, not check-in, that meant he would call as soon as he had the opportunity, not at their pre-arranged check-in times. No, she wasn't upset, just frustrated; she had been looking forward to spending some quality time with Lee today. Once again, the world seemed to be conspiring against them.

>
Amanda sighed. In a few weeks they would celebrate their first anniversary. It would be nice if there were a little more to celebrate. Scenes like this morning were becoming all too common for her and Lee lately. She had thought it would get easier to hide their marriage as time passed, but in that area, practice was making for quite a bit less than perfect. She had to rely on all her Agency training and field experience to maintain this cover. They hadn't talked about it, but she thought Lee was having the same trouble. Maybe they should just come clean and hope for the best, she mused. Surely by now Lee could see that the danger to their family was no different than it had always been, and as for work, well, there just had to be a way to work things out.

>
The sound of the phone ringing jarred her from her reverie.

>
"Hello?" she uttered hopefully.

>
"Amanda! I finally got away. Chaucer's in his suite collecting the presents from Emily. At least I hope that's what they are. Do you know who this guy is?"

>
"I know what his code name means. Do you know if it's really him?"

>
"I'm not sure. We haven't talked much beyond the weather and some 'mutual acquaintances' as he calls them. Have you been able to reach Emily?"

>
"No, there wasn't an answer at all at her house and I could only leave a message at the office. I'm sorry I invited him to dinner, Lee. It's just that if he really is a friend of Emily's, it would be awfully rude not to."

>
"I know, I know," Lee replied resignedly. "It's O.K. Here he comes. We'll be there soon. I love you."

>
"I love you, too, Lee." Amanda hung up the phone and retreated to the security of her kitchen.

>
Thirty minutes later, Dotty and Lillian returned from the grocery store. They entered the kitchen door, each burdened with two

very full shopping bags.

>
"Mother! I thought we just needed whipped cream for the pies. You look like you bought a year's supply." Amanda was astounded at the items that came out of the bags. There were fifteen cans of whipped cream, three bags of chips, two containers each of onion dip and guacamole, four tubes of toothpaste and a large bottle of Pine-sol.

>
"Where's the partridge in the pear tree?" Amanda teased.

>
"Amanda, I am certain that last week I had three cans of whipped cream in the refrigerator for the pies. Now they're gone. I don't know what those boys of yours were thinking, but I intend to find out. And I don't plan on running out between now and New Year's." Dotty began stocking the refrigerator shelves with cans of whipped cream.

>
Amanda turned to hide the flush that quickly rose as her mother spoke. She knew exactly what had happened to that whipped cream and it definitely didn't involve Philip or Jamie. That had been the last time she and Lee had had some time alone together in her house. She had meant to replace it by now, but somehow, she just hadn't gotten around to it. She smiled at the memory and at the hope of borrowing another can or two without her mother's knowledge.

>
"Well, what's all of this other stuff for, Mother?"

>
"The chips and dip are to keep everyone calm in case you forgot about the turkey or got called into the 'editing room' at the last minute. Where is Lee, anyway?" Dotty glanced into the family room, as though certain he would surface. "The guacamole is because Lee said that was his preference. The toothpaste is to go with Philip and Jamie while they're at Joe's next week. Do you know what he feeds them? The Pine-sol is to clean this kitchen -- I keep smelling whipped cream every time I come in here."

>
Amanda regarded her mother with widened eyes and fled into the den. She began rearranging the presents under the tree -- moving all the gifts on the left side to the right and vice versa.

>
"I just know those boys got into some sort of whipped cream fight, Amanda." Dotty's voice carried into the den. "They obviously cleaned up after themselves, but they didn't do a very good job."

>
"Yes, Mother," Amanda called back to her as she fussed with an awkwardly wrapped gift. The ribbon simply would not lay straight, and

. . .
>
"I think you should make them clean it again, dear," her mother continued. "It's the only way they're going to learn."

>
"Yes, Mother. I'll take care of it, Mother." Amanda knew she was still too red to face her mother. She remained focused on the gifts under the Christmas tree, unaware that Aunt Lillian had come up behind her. Lillian smiled at Amanda's distress.

>
"Amanda, if you take care of it, they won't learn to take responsibility for their own actions." Dotty continued her tirade from the kitchen.

>
"Mother, I promise you, the guilty party will reclean that kitchen. You know perfectly well that we face up to our responsibilities around here." Amanda could scarcely keep her voice even. This Christmas was turning into a personal nightmare; couldn't her mother just let it go?

>
Aunt Lillian gently touched Amanda's shoulder. "Maybe your Mr. Stetson could help clean that kitchen later, dear."

>
Amanda turned, horrified. She tried to speak, but that seemed beyond her ability at the moment.

>
"Close your mouth, dear," Aunt Lillian counseled. "You look like

a fish. You wouldn't want your Mr. Stetson to see you like that, now would you?"

>
Amanda gulped and stood, turning to fully face her aunt. "Aunt Lillian, I would like for this conversation to end now -- please."

>
Aunt Lillian nodded and smiled knowingly. "Your secret is safe with me, dear."

>
"Thank you, I think. Now, umm . . . could you get Mother to talk about something, anything, else?"

>
~~~~~/\~~~~~

>
At precisely 5:45 Lee Stetson's silver Corvette pulled up to the curb outside 4247 Maplewood. Lee glared at Joe's car in the driveway. He had arrived at a point where he could accept Joe being around, but Lee felt that he should be pulling into the drive and Joe's car should be parked on the street.

>
"Mr. Stetson," Chaucer said, "are you all right?"

>
It was the first time today that Chaucer had said anything remotely personal, Lee mused. They had talked about the weather, about architecture, about the monuments, about places they had both frequented, about people they both knew; Lee was surprised at just how many people they both knew, even in this business. Still, Lee was certain that this was the first time since he was ordered out of the bullpen that Chaucer had directly addressed him. It had been a very strange day.

>
"Yes, sir." Lee wasn't about to get personal now. "I just had vastly different plans for today. No offense."

>
"None taken. But Mrs. . . .King did say to arrive at six. Punctuality is important."

>
"Actually, she told you to arrive at six." And that damn pause is going to drive me nuts! Lee added mentally.

>
"I'm sure she won't mind if you're along, will she? You are my escort for the day. And you are her . . . partner, are you not?" Chaucer asked.

>
"No, she won't. And yes, I am," Lee replied. "How do you know so much about Amanda? Emily isn't one for telling secrets."

>
"That depends on to whom she's telling them, my boy. Come along, we'll be late if we sit here any longer."

>
Lee and Chaucer walked to the front door, both overburdened with gifts. Chaucer had insisted on buying gifts for the King family himself as well as delivering Emily's gifts. Lee had insisted in turn that it wasn't necessary, but Chaucer only said it wouldn't be fair, he at least owed Amanda a gift. No explanation on this idea of fairness had been forthcoming. Lee almost thought he would have preferred a day on the town with Dr. Smyth. Never had he spent this much time with someone and come away with so little information. Lee remembered Chaucer's comment to Dr. Smyth about being in DC to deliver information. He had watched the old man constantly all day, except for the few minutes in the hotel suite. There had been no drop, no exchange -- they had spent the entire day shuttling from boutique to department store to book store. Lee had no idea shopping could be so exhausting.

>
"Lee, darling," Dotty exclaimed as she answered the door, "we've been waiting for you."

>
Dotty dragged him in the door, taking his packages and handing them to Jamie, who was coming down the stairs behind her. "Dotty West, may I introduce Mr. Chaucer? Mr. Chaucer is a producer in our London office," Lee explained.

>
"I didn't know IFF had a London office." Dotty looked quizzically at Lee as she began to take packages from Chaucer.

>
"A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. West," Chaucer greeted her -- without a pause, Lee noticed. "Not that box, please," Chaucer held on to the unwrapped box at the bottom of his pile. "Is there someplace safe I could set this for awhile?"

>
Lee looked at the box. It was the largest of Chaucer's packages, an unwrapped wooden box about the size of a file drawer, with a hinged lid. The box was old, the corners worn smooth. Lee had the notion that the box went everywhere Chaucer did. It had been one of the items picked up at the hotel and while Chaucer had asked Lee to carry the gifts from Emily, he would not let him handle that box. Dotty led Chaucer to the coat closet, taking his and Lee's coats as she let Chaucer place the box carefully on the floor.

>
"We're so glad to have you with us, Mr. Chaucer. Amanda mentioned you'd be coming with Lee," Dotty said as she led Chaucer into the den. "It must be terrible to be away from your family on Christmas."

>
"Yes, actually, it is," Chaucer agreed.

>
Lee shook his head. Dotty had gained more information in ten seconds than he had all day. There was no doubt Amanda came by her skills naturally.

>
Adding action to that thought, Lee went up and down the short stairs and stood in the kitchen doorway, just out of sight of the family in the den. Amanda was bending over to take the turkey out of the oven. Lee knocked softly on the doorframe to get her attention. She looked up and smiled. Glancing quickly over her shoulder, Amanda noticed Dotty was introducing Chaucer to the family. She closed the oven door and stepped quickly into Lee's arms.

>
"Where have you been?" she asked as he pulled her up onto the stairs, firmly out of everyone else's sight. The worry in her eyes belied her harsh tone.

>
"That's a fine hello," Lee said softly, brushing his fingers across her cheek.

>
Amanda's heart skipped a beat. How did he still affect her this way after almost five years? It made her lose her train of thought occasionally, but she hoped he was still affecting her this way in another five years. She leaned toward him, placing a feather-light kiss on his lips.

>
"Better?" she breathed.

>
"A little," he replied, pulling her closer into his embrace and covering her mouth with his own. Lee leaned back against the wall, drawing Amanda against the length of his body. He pulled back from the kiss after a few moments but continued to hold her tightly to him.

>
"Mmm, much better," he whispered into her ear.

>
"That's odd, she was right here," They could hear Dotty's voice from the kitchen.

>
"Oh, there you are," Aunt Lillian spoke from the base of the stairs. Amanda stepped back, putting just a little distance between Lee and herself.

>
"Aunt Lillian, is it time for dinner already?" Amanda asked, slightly out of breath.

>
"Yes, dear," Aunt Lillian replied. "Your mother's corralling everyone into the dining room."

>
"Thank you, Aunt Lillian. We'll be right in."

>
"Very good, dear." Aunt Lillian paused and then continued, "Amanda?" She wanted her niece's full attention.

>
"Yes?"

>
"I'll just go set that bottle of Pine-sol out for you."

>
Amanda buried her head in Lee's chest.

>
"What the . . ." Lee looked down at his wife, not sure if she was laughing or crying.

>
"I'll tell you later," she said looking up with a sigh and a smirk. "Much later."

>
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>
 As Lee and Amanda entered the dining room, he breathed a slow sigh of relief at the seating arrangements. Aunt Lillian was at one end of the table and Dotty took the other; having his car upstaged was bad enough, Lee doubted he could stomach Joe at the head of this table. To Aunt Lillian's right were Joe, Carrie, Jamie, and then Chaucer next to Dotty; Philip sat at Aunt Lillian's left. Lee seated Amanda next to her mother and took the remaining empty seat.

>
"Mr. Chaucer," Dotty asked, "how are you with a turkey?"

>
"I haven't spent much time with very many turkeys, Dotty," Chaucer replied with a slight smile, "but I do know how to use a carving knife."

>
"Well then," she gestured to the bird, "would you do the honors?"

>
As Chaucer fulfilled his responsibilities as carver, Lee opened his mental file on the man. Item one, he was now on a first name basis with Dotty; perhaps Lee could direct Dotty's conversation to gain more information from Chaucer. Item two, he referred to Carrie as Mrs. King as he carved her portion -- again with no pause in the name. Item three, he was now calling Amanda by her given name, although with an odd lilt in his voice, as though he knew a secret he wasn't about to share. Item four, despite Lee's attempts, the man was now patently avoiding eye contact with him, directing his green eyes instead every few moments in the direction of the closet in the foyer. Item five, he really did know how to use a knife.

>
Amanda could feel the tension radiating from Lee. He was keeping it pretty well in check; she doubted anyone else was aware. There were far too many undercurrents at tonight's dinner, she thought. She catalogued her list of secrets as she regarded her family: There was the secret of their careers; thank goodness Chaucer seemed to have picked up on that. Then there was her marriage to Lee; that was a secret whose time had almost come, she thought, watching Lee glare at Joe. There was an extra secret agent in the house tonight; extra as in additional and as in ultra. Amanda wanted the matter of 'Chaucer's' identity clarified soon. Then, of course, there was that little matter of the secret rendezvous with the whipped cream; Aunt Lillian just wasn't going to let that go. It still struck her as odd to sit down to a family dinner and know that most of the people around the table had almost no clue as to what was really going on.

>
" . . .like to go there someday. What's it like?" Amanda returned to the conversation as Philip questioned Chaucer about his home.

>
"What is London like? That would be difficult to answer to your satisfaction, dear boy. I am a very old man and you, you are a very young one. I'm certain that your impression of my city would be very different from mine. But perhaps you'll visit someday," Chaucer said as he glanced very briefly from Philip to Lee.

>
"So how old are you?" Jamie interjected.

>
"Jamie! You know better than that. Mr. Chaucer, I apologize." Amanda stared at her younger son.

>
"He brought it up," Jamie muttered.

>
"Never fear, dear boy. I'm not offended. I turned ninety-three

this year. I'm reaching the point where I'm rather proud of my age again." Chaucer smiled in Jamie's direction and reached across to pat the back of Amanda's hand. "I did, as he said, bring it up, my dear."

>
"You don't look a day over seventy-five." Joe toasted Chaucer with his wineglass.

>
"Spending a holiday with you good people, I almost feel fifty again," Chaucer replied.

>
Lee leaned back in his chair, relaxing somewhat. This is good, he thought. Just listen and the King family might gradually drag a few more pieces of information out of Chaucer. He ran his hand along Amanda's thigh; as she turned toward him, he relaxed his shoulders and raised his eyebrows. She widened her eyes and took his hand in hers. Lee smiled; she would follow his lead.

>
The exchange lasted only a few seconds, but it did not go unnoticed by Chaucer.

>
"Wow," Jamie exclaimed, "you're even older than Grandma. Uhh. . .sorry"

>
"Be careful, Jamie," Lee cautioned, placing his glass carefully on the table. "Your ice is getting mighty thin."

>
Jamie looked from Lee's amused expression to his mother's and grandmother's horrified faces and cringed. Lee rode to both Jamie's and Dotty's rescue.

>
"If you feel fifty," Lee said to Chaucer, "then you're perfect company for Dotty West, who was obviously a child bride when Amanda was born. Just between you and me, sir, I think she's the second most beautiful woman I know." Lee paused and winked at Amanda.

>
"Why, Mr. Stetson," Dotty responded flirtatiously, "I just knew there was a reason we were keeping you around. Flattery like that will go a long way around here." Dotty eyed her daughter intently.

>
"Oh, really?" Lee replied, glancing at Amanda, "I'll have to remember that."

>
"Not that I would ever detract from Dotty's obvious charms," Joe interjected, "but I think most guys would save that compliment for their own mother."

>
"Lee's mom died when he was a kid, Dad," Philip supplied matter-of-factly.

>
"Aman . . ." Lee muttered, diverting his glare to his silverware.

>
"How sad . . . I'm so sorry . . . How difficult for you," chorused their dinner companions.

>
"He asked, Lee," Amanda whispered uncertainly. She reached out tentatively, brushing her fingertips over his leg.

>
"It's OK. It's just . . . I'm OK," Lee murmured, quickly schooling his features.

>
"It is very difficult not having family to spend the holidays with isn't it, my boy?" Chaucer studied Lee purposefully.

>
"Oh, you know, you just find something else to do with the day." Lee evaded his stare. This little attempt at a Class C interrogation was really backfiring. Lee didn't want to be on the receiving end of it any longer. He focused his attention on his meal.

>
Amanda hated to see Lee begin to pull back into that particular shell. He had come too far in the last year in dealing with the repercussions of his parents' deaths. She had to shift the conversation to a safer target.

>
"So, Mr. Chaucer," she queried, "how long will you be in DC?"

>
"That depends," he said. "You'll recall I said I had some

information to deliver? The length of my stay is directly dependent on how that information is received."

>
"That sounds very mysterious," Dotty teased. "I wouldn't think there would be anything like industrial espionage in the documentary film business."

>
"My word, no, Dotty," Chaucer regarded her humorously. "I just have a proposal to make."

>
"A proposal?" Dotty glanced archly at Amanda. "Wouldn't that be nice?"

>
"Not that kind of proposal," Chaucer replied quickly.

>
"Oh, are you married?" Carrie asked.

>
"Yes, I am, Mrs. King."

>
"What a pity your wife couldn't travel with you," Joe commented.

>
"She always travels with me, Mr. King," Chaucer responded. "She died many years ago, but she's always with me, right here," he said placing his hand over his heart.

>
"How long has it been?" Lee asked, finally looking up.

>
"Over thirty years, my boy, and sometimes it feels like yesterday."

>
Now this is progress, thought Lee. Keep it up, Scarecrow, keep pushing. Class C, handholding and sweet talk. Allies or not, this guy has secrets. And eventually, mused Lee, all secrets see the light of day. He looked thoughtfully at Amanda.

>
"I can imagine how you feel," Lee continued. "How long were you married before she died?"

>
"I'm very sure you know exactly how I feel, my boy." Chaucer had captured Lee's gaze again. Lee swallowed reflexively and returned the stare with a bravado that was increasingly false. As before, Lee felt his very core being placed on a scale. He wondered if he was found wanting. He wondered why it mattered.

>
"We were married in 1920; she died 35 years later."

>
"Any children?" Lee fired back rapidly.

>
"Mr. Stetson," Chaucer eyes bored into Lee, "I can appreciate the position you find yourself in, but I am not accustomed to being interrogated at the dinner table."

>
"Give the guy a break, Lee," Joe King sought to diffuse the tension that was returning.

>
"Just curious." Lee sounded nonchalant as he sipped his wine.

>
"He brought it up," Jamie muttered. Lee flashed the boy a quick smile. Jamie grinned back.

>
Those smiles did more to ease the strain than Joe's defense of Chaucer and dinner proceeded in a far more relaxed setting. Dotty and Philip questioned Chaucer about Christmas traditions in England. Amanda asked Carrie about her family's holiday plans. Jamie regaled everyone with the details of his latest science project. Lee listened, occasionally glancing at Chaucer, waiting for something to slip.

>
Even the few details Chaucer had provided would all be a matter of public record, providing they actually knew the man's real name, Lee mused. Just how good do you think you are, Scarecrow? Going toe to toe with England's most hidden top dog; this guy's probably been in the game since World War I. The very fact that he's alive shows just how good he is. If he were any kind of threat to national security somebody would have been on to him by now.

>
"Mr. Chaucer," Dotty took his arm to lead everyone back into the den after dinner, "you still haven't told me your first name."

>
Lee looked up at Chaucer as he offered Amanda his hand.

>
"It's . . ." he paused, looking at Lee. "It's Jacob," he said, conceding the point.

>
Lee nodded, claiming it.

>
Amanda rose, but held Lee's hand to keep him in the dining room. The others continued into the den.

>
"We'll clear this away, Mother. You all relax and Lee and I will join you in a few minutes." Amanda lowered her voice as she turned to her husband.

>
"You know that's probably not his real name," she whispered.

>
"I know." Lee gathered plates as Amanda picked up the glasses.

>
"Amanda, there's something strange about this guy. I can't place it, but it's driving me crazy," Lee spoke each word succinctly.

>
"I know what you mean. There's just something about him that makes me feel . . . I don't know. The man has been a spy for . . . well for just about forever. What do you expect? What do you think you'll be like in fifty or sixty years?" Amanda placed the dishes in the sink.

>
"I'll be happy to live that long," Lee countered, returning to the dining room.

>
"Don't say things like that." Amanda followed him.

>
He turned and held her by the shoulders, looking in her eyes. She stared back almost defiantly, then relaxed as he brought a finger to her lips.

>
"It's not bad luck, Mrs. Stetson," he whispered. "Besides, we're good." He leaned forward and replaced his finger with his lips, cupping her cheek with his hand.

>
"Oh, yeah," Amanda whispered as she drew back reluctantly, "we're very good."

>
"That's my girl," Lee kissed her again quickly. "Oh, when we go out there, remember, follow my lead."

>
"Lee, I'm getting tired of this game. I just want to enjoy Christmas."

>
"Then trust me. And. Follow. My. Lead." Lee collected a plateful of cutlery and turned toward the kitchen. When Amanda stayed rooted in place, he waved from the table to the kitchen.

>
"Amanda? I. Said. Follow."

>
"Oh give it a rest, Scarecrow. All right, I'll play. Whatever you do, whatever you say, I'll follow your lead. But I expect to be able to make a few rules of my own once all these people leave."

>
"I'll hold you to that." Lee winked and turned to go through the door.

>
Amanda began rinsing the dishes and loading the dishwasher as Lee filled the refrigerator with leftovers. He was dumbstruck when he opened the refrigerator door, then a slow smile spread across his face.

>
"You really liked that, huh?" Lee asked his wife.

>
"What?" Amanda looked into the open refrigerator and blushed furiously.

>
"Lee Stetson, do not even talk to me about whipped cream tonight," she whispered intently, moving closer to him. "You have no idea what Mother and Aunt Lillian have put me through today over those missing cans. Mother thinks Philip and Jamie . . . Oh, hello, Mother," she said with forced cheer over Lee's shoulder.

>
"Amanda, I just came in to get the pies ready. Lee, will you take that one out for me? And a can of whipped cream? Thank you, dear." Dotty was oblivious to the conversation she had interrupted. Lee numbly did as he was asked as Amanda turned back to the sink, blushing Christmas red.

>
"Lee," Dotty continued, "get another pie and another can of whipped cream and help me with this would you, dear? I always have trouble with these ridiculous cans. Do you know how to get them open without them exploding all over you?"

>
"Well, sure, Dotty, I . . . I can probably figure it out." Lee struggled to keep the redness from his own features as Amanda strangled a laugh with a cough and a sneeze.

>
"Bless you, sweetheart," Dotty said over her shoulder. "You know, I had three cans in there last week and this morning I looked and they were gone. Can you believe that, Lee, just . . . gone? I just know Philip and Jamie had some sort of fight with them in here while I was away. Have you noticed how the whole kitchen has smelled like whipped cream for days? No, of course you haven't. Why should you notice? How much time have you ever spent in this kitchen?"

>
Lee set the can down on the counter and retreated to stand against Amanda's back. He could feel her shaking, holding in laughter or tears or maybe both.

>
"Dotty, you know, I probably wouldn't do a very good job with that after all," Lee said hesitantly. "I'll . . . I'll just go keep our friend Jacob company."

>
"Coward," Amanda muttered as he stepped away.

>
~~~~~/\~~~~~

>
As Lee fled for the relative sanctuary of the den, he checked his progress and returned to the closet in the foyer. Retrieving a small box from his coat pocket, he regarded the larger box on the floor. There was a leather strap with a buckle that kept the hinged lid closed, but the box did not appear to be locked in any way. Lee very gently picked up the box and shook it slightly. He was rewarded with a dull thud and a slight rustle; the box was full, he deduced, perhaps with books, papers, files? What sort of files might England's premier spymaster deem too sensitive to leave away from his person? Lee set the box back on the floor and reached for the buckle, determined to have answers to his questions.

>
"Mr. Stetson," Aunt Lillian's voice floated from the den, "what kind of pie do you want?"

>
Lee pulled back his hand and stood up quickly. He tucked his own small box into the pocket of his sportcoat and was closing the closet door just as Aunt Lillian entered the foyer.

>
"Were you looking for something, dear?"

>
"No . . . no . . . I just needed something from my coat. Did you say something about pie? I'd love a slice," he said, taking her by the arm and leading her back to the den. He glanced back toward the closet once, pondering the mysterious box.

>
Lee stopped short as he returned to the den. Amanda was seated on the sofa, flanked by Philip on one side and Joe on the other; Jamie sat on the floor in front of his father. Lee didn't begrudge the boys, but Joe . . . Joe was another matter. Lee wanted Joe off the sofa, out the door, out of the driveway, and safely visiting his own in-laws as quickly as possible. The four of them looked like the perfect family. That had to stop. Lee would collar Joe and throw him bodily out the front door. No, he would pick Amanda up bodily and carry her away to their apartment and make love to her all night. No, he just wanted everyone to know, to assume, that the place next to

Amanda was reserved for him, and only him, always.

>
Amanda felt Lee's eyes on her. She looked up at him and smiled. He returned it, but hesitantly. Even so, Lee's smile flooded her with warmth. She nodded in response to something Joe was saying, not really hearing. She rose and glided to Lee's side, taking his hand.

>
Lee squeezed her hand gently. Even if the rest of the world was unaware of his rightful place, at least Amanda was certain. He released her hand and took the seat next to Carrie. As Amanda walked back toward the sofa, Lee's hand clenched into a fist. She's going to sit back down next to Joe. How could she? To his astonishment and delight she collected a slice of pie from the coffee table, followed him to the chair, and perched herself on its arm.

>
"I believe this is your favorite," she said, leaning toward him with the slice of pie. "Extra whipped cream," she whispered in his ear.

>
"You do know what I like," Lee said softly, relaxing his clenched forearm.

>
"This is quite a family you've gotten yourself into, my boy." Chaucer turned to Lee from his examination of the pictures on the bookshelves. Most of the pictures were of Amanda with one or both of her sons; several included Dotty. But Chaucer noticed two pictures, one of Lee and Amanda in a loose embrace, and another of Lee and Philip leaning against Lee's car. The photos were the work of an amateur, but they were displayed with pride.

>
"I certainly think so," Lee replied as he put an arm around Amanda's waist. He was a little leery of letting Chaucer see this much of his secret life with Amanda, but this man had secrets of his own. Chaucer would gain nothing by betraying them to the Agency.

>
"Lillian, are we ready to start?" Dotty asked her sister.

>
"Start what?" asked Chaucer.

>
"Well," Joe said with a cough as he rose from the sofa, "I guess we'd better get going."

>
YES! Lee thought. FINALLY! GO! GO! GO AWAY!

>
"Joe, Carrie," Dotty crooned as she stood between them, "don't be silly. You're family, too. You can't leave now."

>
"We've already given the boys our gifts, Dotty. You don't need us in the way," Joe shook his head and reached for Carrie's hand.

>
Damn straight we don't need you. Lee fought to keep the words off of his lips.

>
"Joe King, I said you can't leave and I meant it. Now, both of you, sit down."

>
They complied as Dotty turned her attention to Chaucer.

>
"What we are starting, Jacob, is a tradition my parents began with Lillian and me. On Christmas Eve each person gives one gift to someone else, it doesn't matter whom. The only rule is that the gift has to be something hand made or already in the giver's possession, not something bought for the holiday. Sometimes one person ends up with all the Christmas Eve gifts and sometimes they get spread around. The focus is on the giving, not the getting." Dotty glared at Philip and Jamie as she finished, hoping to drive her point home.

>
"That sounds lovely, Dotty. Is it all right if I watch? Mr. Stetson is my transportation, you understand." Chaucer's words were for Dotty, but his eyes were on Lee as he spoke.

>
"Heck no, Lee can't leave, yet," Philip insisted. "He's as much

family as Carrie is, Grandma."

>
"I wouldn't dream of asking Lee to leave."

>
Lee settled back into the chair. He rubbed his hand lightly across the small of Amanda's back, thinking. This day was so far removed from what he had anticipated it to be -- first Chaucer, then Joe and Carrie; he expected they would have left by now. He sighed, eyeing Joe uncertainly; he would just make the best of it.

>
"I'd like to start this year, Dotty," Aunt Lillian stated.

"Amanda, dear, this is for you. I dare say you're expecting it."

>
Amanda took the gift Aunt Lillian handed her. It was a hatbox with a large red bow on top. Amanda smiled at Aunt Lillian as she removed the lid. The first thing she saw inside was a dishtowel. Amanda's smile faded to puzzlement. When she lifted a corner of the dishtowel she saw just what she feared. Amanda's puzzlement gave way to resigned embarrassment. She quickly replaced both the dishtowel and lid. No one else had seen the gift.

>
"Thank you so-o-o very much, Aunt Lillian. I'm sure I'll put that to good use," Amanda said clutching the gift tightly. Amanda stared straight ahead. She couldn't look at Aunt Lillian. She didn't dare look toward Mother. And Lee, he was no help.

>
"Come on," Lee said, reaching for the box, "what'd ya get?"

>
Amanda held the box out of his reach.

>
"Oh no, pal, hands off." Amanda stood to carry her gift to the closet in the foyer.

>
"Come on, Mom," called Philip, "we wanna see."

>
"Philip, this is my gift and I will do with it as I please."

Amanda reddened as she thought of how she would explain this gift to her sons.

>
"You know," Lee said to Aunt Lillian, "I don't think I've ever seen Amanda turn quite that shade of red before."

>
"Yeah, Aunt Lillian," Philip added, "tell us what you got her before she comes back."

>
Aunt Lillian smiled first at Philip, then at Lee.

>
"I'm sure if Amanda needs for you to know about her gift, she will tell you."

>
"Sometimes these gifts turn out to be private jokes." Amanda could hear her mother explaining to Chaucer. "This one seems to be better than most," she added wryly, gazing after her retreating daughter.

>
As Amanda placed her gift on the shelf in the closet she looked down at the box on the floor. It hadn't been there earlier. She wondered briefly who had brought it in. She resisted the urge to pick it up and shake it. After all, it was Christmas, perhaps this was one the gifts from Emily. Amanda closed the door and made her back to the den.

>
As she returned, Jamie was drooling over his gift from Dotty.

>
"Your mother and I were cleaning in the attic a few weeks ago and I came across these dark room supplies. They belonged to your grandfather. He was an amateur photographer, too, Jamie. You've talked so much about setting up a dark room in the attic, I thought these might help."

>
"Grandma, this is great!" Jamie hugged Dotty and then turned to Lee. "Lee, after Christmas break could you get that friend of yours to help us set it all up? I've got a list of what I'll need. This takes care of some of it, but I need a few more things. Will you help?"

>
Lee was touched that Jamie had asked for his help. They really had come a long way since the spring.

>
"Sure, sport. We'll find a weekend and get you in business," Lee replied. "Now, don't you have something?" Lee nodded from the tree to Dotty.

>
Jamie seemed a little hesitant to offer his gift.

>
"Just do it, Jamie," Lee encouraged the boy.

>
Jamie collected a flat package from under the tree. He placed it in his grandmother's hands. "I hope you like it, Grandma. I got lucky. Lee thinks it's pretty good."

>
Dotty unwrapped her gift carefully. Inside the festive paper was a framed photo of her and Amanda. Dotty remembered the morning depicted in this photo, although she hadn't known their resident shutterbug had been present at the time. She and Amanda had been arguing. Amanda had been avoiding Dotty's questions, again. The photo showed their profiles facing one another. You could clearly see all the frustration and exasperation that made up a large part of their relationship, but you could see love and respect in their faces, too.

>
"Jamie, this is wonderful," Dotty said softly. "It's very good. You captured your mother perfectly. Thank you, sweetheart."

>
Philip rose quickly and grabbed Amanda's sleeve as Dotty began taking the photo around the room for everyone to inspect.

>
"I couldn't think of anything really good this year, Mom," Philip said carefully, "so all I have is this." He pulled a folded piece of paper out of his back pocket and handed it to Amanda.

>
"This is for me?" Amanda asked.

>
"Yeah, it's kinda stupid, but . . ."

>
"Nothing you do is stupid, Philip," Amanda responded automatically as she began reading this letter from her older son. In it he spelled out his Christmas gift to her . . . he promised to do his homework, to mow the lawn on time, to do the dishes without complaining, to keep his room clean, to not leave pencils on the sofa -- the list went on in great detail.

>
"Philip," Amanda said slowly, "this is a wonderful gift. You gave me yourself. Thank you." She smiled as she hugged him.

>
By this time Jamie's photo had made the circuit of the room. Amanda gave Philip another quick hug and went to collect a package from under the tree.

>
She walked over to Lee, who was with Chaucer and Dotty at the bookshelves, looking for a place to display this newest addition.

>
"Lee," Amanda said softly, holding the gift out to him, "before you open this, let me explain."

>
Lee smiled and sighed. Amanda's rambling explanations had driven him crazy in the beginning, but now . . . either she rambled less or he understood more . . . either way, when she did it now it was endearing instead of exasperating.

>
"I came across this in the attic in a box of my father's things. I can't imagine him ever wearing it. Mother doesn't remember it. But when I saw it, I knew I had to give it to you." Amanda took a deep breath and smiled.

>
She could have given him a wet sock and Lee would have been happy. For her to include him in this little family tradition meant a lot. He tore off the paper and opened the box. Inside was a deep red fedora. Lee laughed as he took it out of the box and put it on. He gave Amanda a quick kiss on the cheek in thank you.

>
"Now you'd better not ever tell me again that you can't find the

man in the red hat," Lee cautioned her.

>
"I won't." She slipped her arms around his neck. "I know just where to find him."

>
"Sorry," Lee said as he glanced from Chaucer's tolerant expression to Dotty's curious one and on to Joe's slightly annoyed look, "private joke."

>
"Amanda," he focused back to the woman in his arms, "sit down. I have a gift for you, too." He led Amanda back to the chair he had occupied earlier. Helping her to sit, Lee then turned to Dotty.

>
"Dotty, I want to make sure I understand the rules here correctly. I can only give a gift that I either made or have already owned for some time, right?" Lee questioned her.

>
Dotty nodded, wondering what Lee was up to. She had just about given up hope of him ever doing what she thought he just might possibly be getting ready to do. She liked Lee, but he and Amanda had certainly tried her patience over the last year.

>
Lee glanced quickly around the room. He had expected Dotty and the boys, of course, though he had thought that Joe and Carrie would have left by now. Damn the torpedoes! he thought, Joe needs to know just where things stand. But Chaucer, what was that man's game? If he and Amanda had little chance at a normal life, what kind of life did Chaucer lead? His life was probably buried in so many layers of lies and covers and aliases, Lee wondered if he even knew his own name anymore.

>
Setting his other concerns at bay, Lee knelt in front of Amanda. He took both of her hands in his, relaxed his shoulders and raised his eyebrows. Amanda looked at him quizzically, then squeezed his hands and widened her eyes slightly. Lee smiled and took a deep breath.

>
"Amanda King, I think you're the best, the bravest, the smartest, most beautiful woman I've ever known." Lee looked into Amanda's eyes expectantly. He knew she would remember the words. Days after he first spoke them she had asked him to say them again because she wasn't certain she had remembered everything correctly at the time and she wanted very much to remember those words. But would she respond? He hadn't discussed this with her. He only knew he couldn't go on any longer as they were.

>
"I love you, too, Lee," Amanda replied softly. Lee let out a breath he had forgotten he was holding. He tightened his grip on her hands.

>
"Then will you marry me?" A chorus of gasps and sighs and one exuberant "Yes!" from Philip greeted this question. But Philip's yes was not the one Lee waited to hear. Amanda could still back down, still keep the secret.

>
"Will I marry you? Yeah, I'll marry you," Amanda pulled her hands from Lee's and cupped each side of his face, kissing him tenderly. Lee leaned into her kiss, extending it. He thought briefly that he felt more relief at her positive answer this time than he had the first time he had proposed.

>
Amanda pulled back and grinned, still cradling Lee's head in her hands.

>
"We really are the luckiest two people on the face of the earth," she told him and kissed him again.

>
This time Lee broke off the encounter. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small pale blue box tied with a white ribbon. Amanda smiled as he handed it to her.

>
"I did say I had a gift for you. And this has been sitting around the apartment for an awfully long time." Lee grinned and winked at his wife.

>
Amanda took the familiar box from Lee and opened it slowly. She carefully removed the even more familiar velvet box inside. She opened it and removed her engagement ring, the diamond reflecting the light from the fire and the tree. Unbidden, tears sprang to her eyes. Their 'mystery marriage' had been more burden and frustration than love and joy lately. It had all been his idea in the first place; she was thrilled that Lee had been the one to put an end to it.

>
"This is a much better place to store it," Lee said softly, placing the ring on her finger.

>
"It's going to stay there for a very long time," Amanda whispered.

>
"It's going to stay there forever," Lee replied, leaning forward for another kiss.

>
"Hey, you two," Carrie King interrupted them, "how about setting a date?" Carrie trusted Joe and she genuinely liked Amanda, but a married Amanda would provide that small extra measure of security she sometimes craved.

>
Lee broke off their kiss with a laugh, one that Amanda mirrored.

>
"I had almost forgotten they were all even still here," Amanda whispered to him.

>
"Me, too," he murmured, nodding.

>
Amanda gazed around the room at her family. Her mother seemed ready to jump from her skin; she had been waiting for this for years. Philip and Jamie looked happy for her; she would visit with each of them later to be sure. Joe looked, well, lost; she thought that being recently married himself and having seen her with Lee over the past year would have prepared him for this. Aunt Lillian just looked smug; Amanda reddened and turned away. Chaucer regarded Lee and Amanda with something akin to pride; Amanda could not imagine why. His very presence here brought thought of work and the Agency's probable reaction to her public relationship with Lee.

>
Lee's attention followed Amanda's to Chaucer. He looked thoughtfully at the elderly man. How much damage could he, would he, do to them?

>
"We'll figure it out," Lee whispered to Amanda.

>
"As for a date," he said, raising his voice, "I was thinking maybe sometime in February." He smiled as Amanda appeared to give his idea some thought.

>
"February!" Dotty exclaimed, "Do you have any idea just how much effort goes into planning a wedding, Lee? We can't possibly pull one off in just six or seven weeks. It's ridiculous! It's unthinkable! Amanda, reason with him."

>
"Well, now, Mother," Amanda applied her reasoning skills to Dotty, "we don't have to have a big wedding. I think we could pull something together by the middle of February."

>
"If it's going to be that much trouble . . ." Lee offered, "we could just elope."

>
Amanda brightened at that idea. She laughed and ran her hand through Lee's hair. Dotty did not share her enthusiasm.

>
"Lee Stetson," she ordered, "if you even think of carrying my daughter off without my being there to see it, I will never let you forget it. I will haunt you with that mistake for the rest of your days."

>
"It was just a thought, Dotty," Lee sputtered, "I was trying to help."

>
Lee caught Amanda's eye and held it. Together they took a very deep breath. She shared his relief at avoiding that disaster with tonight's performance.

>
Chaucer stood by the bookshelf, chuckling softly. Lee stared at him. He rose and walked over to the bookshelf, trying to will information from Chaucer's mind through eye contact alone. Chaucer returned his gaze stoically, the shutters firmly drawn on his soul.

>
"I was just thinking how pleased Emily will be with this story," Chaucer told Lee. "Congratulations, my boy, to you and to your lovely bride."

>
"Thank you," Lee replied through slightly clenched teeth. "I'll make sure you get an invitation."

>
"That would be very considerate, wouldn't it?" Chaucer asked archly.

>
Lee's brow furrowed, but he nodded and went back to Amanda's side. He perched on the arm of the chair as her family admired her ring.

>
"Congratulations, Lee," Joe offered him his hand. "I hope you can make the adjustment."

>
"I have a feeling Amanda and I will manage just fine, Joe," Lee replied, "but we know who to look up when we need advice, don't we?" Somehow Lee couldn't resist a small dig at Joe's expense. Too many years working with Francine, he decided.

>
Amanda and Carrie, examining the ring, were oblivious to this exchange. Carrie stood and took Joe's hand.

>
"We really should be leaving now, Amanda," she said. "I'm glad we didn't miss all the excitement."

>
Joe and Carrie took their leave. Lee and Amanda settled into the sofa, gazing warmly at each other, once again shutting out the other occupants in the room.

>
"Mom . . . Mom . . . Mom!" Jamie struggled to get his mother's attention.

>
"What . . . oh, I'm sorry, sweetheart," Amanda smiled. "What can I do for you?" she asked Jamie as she removed her hands from Lee's lap and folded them carefully in her own.

>
"Nothing, I just wanted to say goodnight. Philip's going to help me carry all this stuff upstairs." Jamie looked at the floor, clearly uncomfortable with breaking through the wall of intimacy his mother and Lee had drawn around themselves. Amanda stood self-consciously and put her arm around him, kissing him on the cheek.

>
"Goodnight, sweetheart, I'll see you in the morning." Amanda turned him gently toward the stairs.

>
"Oh, congratulations, Mom. Congratulations, Lee," Jamie threw the words over his shoulder.

>
"Yeah, Lee," Philip added. "Welcome to the family for real."

>
"Thanks, guys." Lee smiled and turned back to Amanda as she resumed her seat. Dotty and her sister were cleaning the desert dishes. Chaucer settled into the chair next to them.

>
"Umm . . ." Lee realized his own departure would have to be soon, too.

>
"I'm not quite ready to leave, my boy," Chaucer told him quietly. "But I would like your undivided attention . . . both of you," he added, looking at Amanda.

>
Amanda looked over her shoulder at her mother and her aunt talking in the kitchen. She glanced back to Lee and Chaucer. Both men were staring at her expectantly.

>
"Mother," Amanda called, "Lee and I can finish up in there if you like. We have some business to wrap up with Mr. Chaucer, anyway. Why don't you and Aunt Lillian go on up to bed, too?"

>
Lillian dropped her dishtowel and turned to her niece.

>
"You don't have to tell me twice, dear," she said with a smile. "Housework has never been high on my list of fun things to do. Just make sure you two do a really good job in here," she added the last with a sly wink.

>
"Yes, Aunt Lillian. We will, Aunt Lillian. Goodnight, Aunt Lillian," Amanda called after her aunt's retreating steps.

>
"Business?" Dotty said in surprise. "Who has business to wrap up on Christmas Eve?"

>
We do, thought Amanda, almost every year. Amanda pursed her lips thoughtfully at Lee. She had long since exhausted her supply of ready responses to her mother's frequent probing questions. Lee turned to Chaucer, just as much at a loss for an answer.

>
Chaucer rose and went to take Dotty's right hand in his.

>
"Just some paperwork we need to go over, Dotty. I would like to get it over with now, while all three of us are here. You understand?" He took her hand and brought it to his lips.

>
"Perhaps you would join me for dinner some evening and I could bore you with all the details," he continued as he released her hand.

>
"That would be very nice, Jacob," Dotty replied.

>
"All right," she glared at her daughter, "I'll leave you alone."

>
~~~~~/\~~~~~

>
Chaucer returned to his seat as Dotty climbed the stairs. Lee and Amanda waited expectantly. When all they received was his now familiar probing stare, Amanda broke the silence.

>
"Nicely done, with Mother, I mean."

>
"Amanda . . ." The way Chaucer said her name had been giving Amanda an odd tingling at the back of her neck all evening. He knows something, she thought. Chaucer coughed quietly and started again.

>
"Amanda," he said more hesitantly, "if I have a gift that meets the requirements of your family tradition, may I give it . . . now?"

>
That was not a question that either Lee or Amanda had expected.

>
"Sure." Amanda answered, "I wish you had said something earlier. We would have included you."

>
"I'm certain of that, my dear, but this gift . . ." Chaucer seemed to wrestle with a decision. Lee and Amanda watched his struggle with growing concern.

>
"On with it," he stated. "No, this gift needs to stay between the three of us for now."

>
"Then it is business," Lee leaned forward.

>
"Not exactly." Chaucer leaned back further in his chair. "Lee, my boy, would you, please, go and retrieve my wooden box from the closet?"

>
"Sure thing," Lee said as he stood.

>
When he opened the closet door, Lee stared at the box for a few seconds. He wondered what Chaucer could have been carrying around that warranted Agency attention, but had apparently not been shared with Dr. Smyth. Another threat of a security leak? Lee wondered. Maybe one that threatened British operatives as well? Was that why Amanda couldn't contact Emily?

>
Lee left conjecture on the floor as he picked up the box. It looked as though all his questions would be answered soon enough.

>
Lee placed the box on the coffee table and sat on the edge of the sofa cushion, looking intently at Chaucer. Chaucer returned his stare, measure for measure; once again, Lee felt as though he were being held to account, for what, he was not sure.
>
"Open the box, my boy," Chaucer instructed, turning his head to gaze at the Christmas tree. "Do not remove any of the contents yet."

>
Lee gingerly unbuckled the leather strap, his fingers fumbling uncharacteristically. What's going on here? he thought as he carefully raised the hinged lid.
>
"Inside you will find three books, one blue, one green, and one white." Lee nodded as Chaucer spoke, running his hand cautiously across the spines of the large leather bound volumes.
>
"Open the blue one first," ordered Chaucer.
>
Lee complied. The book was large and bulky. The pages were of a heavy weight paper. He opened the cover and turned the first page. He stared at the contents, utterly and completely shocked and confused.

>
"It looks like a scrapbook. I have something like this for Philip and Jamie," Amanda said, just as confused. She began idly thumbing through the pages from the side. Lee sat completely still, hands fallen to his side, staring at the small black and white photo on the first page. It was of a very young infant, the kind taken by proud parents when the new addition first arrives home.
>
"Where did you get this?" Lee whispered, immobile with shock.

>
Chaucer did not turn to face him.
>
"Keep looking, my boy." Chaucer directed his words to the Christmas tree.
>
Amanda took the book from Lee's lap, placing it on the table, then knelt on the floor in front of him. She took his hand and ducked her head, trying to catch his eye as he stared at the spot where the photo had been.
>
"Lee . . ." she spoke his name softly, "what is it?"

>
"Amanda . . ." Lee inhaled deeply, ordering his thoughts. He reached past her for the scrapbook. Taking it back into his lap he pointed at the photo.
>
"This is me."
>
Amanda looked at Chaucer. He was still studying her tree.

>
Lee turned several pages. "This is all me. Look, my parents . . . our old house . . . there's my uncle . . . I don't remember meeting him before . . . I don't know these people, but there's me with my mother . . . there's me in the tree outside the house . . ." He stopped as he came to a newspaper clipping reporting on the accident that resulted in his parents' deaths. Amanda placed her arm around his shoulders as he read the cold, impersonal words. Amanda turned the next page for Lee.
>
"This is me . . . I think I was about seven . . . there's my uncle . . . there's Barney . . . I went to school there . . . this kid was my best friend for three years . . ." Amanda continued turning the pages as Lee identified the people and places the photos depicted. "This was taken at Wheeler Air Force Base . . . this is at Edwards . . . this guy flew with the Colonel . . . this one was at McConnell . . . this is from when we were in Japan . . ."

>
"Chaucer, where did you get this? I've never even seen most of these pictures. What am I to you?" Lee silently willed the man to

turn and face him. Surprisingly, it worked. Chaucer turned slowly and met Lee's gaze. Lee looked back at the book; Chaucer's eyes remained unreadable.

>
"I've already told you, Lee," Chaucer said. "I've been telling you all day."

>
Lee took up the task of turning pages as Amanda looked on.

Junior high, high school, college -- his entire life seemed to be in this book. Lee noticed as he aged that there were fewer pictures and more newspaper clippings and school event programs that mentioned his name. He looked up at Chaucer again, about to ask why.

>
"By the time you were in high school you were already quite skilled at eluding a tail," Chaucer admitted with a trace of . . . was that frustration or pride, Amanda wondered as she watched both men.

>
"I always thought the Colonel was having me followed," he confessed. "To make sure I was staying on the straight and narrow." He grinned nervously at Amanda and turned another page.

>
"The Wizard . . . and Dorothy . . ." Amanda held him more tightly as he closed the book sharply. "That's it! Tell me why you've had me under surveillance my whole life."

>
"Keep looking, my boy," Chaucer said hoarsely as he met Lee's stubborn stare, "the answers will come."

>
Lee stared defiantly at Chaucer for several minutes. Chaucer would not relent. Reluctantly, Lee reopened the book.

>
"There's Harry . . . how did you get this? Do you know Harry? And Billy . . . This is Eric, my partner . . . Look, there's Francine . . . Hey, Amanda, that's you right after you started." Amanda had turned her attention to Chaucer as Lee came to pictures of people she knew. If this spy who had come to dinner meant her husband any harm . . . Amanda glanced back at Lee briefly when he said her name. As he turned to the next page, her eyes were riveted to the photo held there.

>
"Oh. My. Gosh. Where did you get this?" Amanda hissed at Chaucer. The picture was a very familiar one. To her knowledge, the only copy of that picture was safe in their apartment. To see it here was disconcerting, to say the least. The photo was the one that had been taken on their wedding day in February.

>
Lee was equally unnerved. He turned the remaining few pages. There were a few more photos of Amanda, as well as pictures with Philip, Jamie, and Dotty. Some of the pictures were taken by some other party, but Lee recognized many of the photos as duplicates of ones the family had taken.

>
"How . . . why?" Lee struggled to make sense of this record of his life.

>
"This has always been my way of documenting the lives of people who are important to me," Chaucer spoke carefully. "My wife always chided me for it; not a very masculine hobby, she would say."

>
"Why is Lee important to you?" Amanda queried. It was becoming clear that Chaucer meant Lee no physical harm, but tonight was exacting an emotional toll on her husband. She would protect him from as much of that as she could as well.

>
"Why is Lee important to you, Mrs. Stetson?" Chaucer waved at the box, emphasizing the rhetorical nature of his question. "Would you rather I call you that, now that the others all are gone?"

>
"I would rather you answer her question," Lee growled.

>
"Open the green book," Chaucer ordered calmly.

>
"It's obvious you know a lot more about us than we do about

you," Lee pushed. "I want an answer."
>
"I'm giving you one, my boy. Open the green book."
>
Lee surrendered. He'd been beating his head against Chaucer's walls all day with little success. If he had to play the man's game to get some answers, then so be it. Lee reached into the box and removed the green book.
>
This time a baby picture on the front page didn't surprise him. He'd expected it.
>
"Who is this?" Lee asked Chaucer.
>
"Keep looking."
>
Lee turned several pages, watching the baby on the first page grow to manhood. There were not as many childhood pictures as there had been in his book, but the boy in the pictures did look oddly familiar . . .
>
"Lee," Amanda said, "that's not you, but it looks like you. I mean like the pictures of you as a little boy."
>
Lee shook his head, refusing to acknowledge the resemblance. As he turned a few more pages it became clear who was the subject of this book. He stopped at a photo of a young man in his late twenties. The man was wearing an Army uniform circa World War II. Lee stared at the photo, willing it to life.
>
"Dad . . ." he whispered. He looked up at Chaucer. "You had my father and me under surveillance? This doesn't make any sense." Lee shook his head, trying to fit the information into what he knew of his father's life.
>
"No," Chaucer replied, "I met your father during the war. I gathered those earlier photos after he became important to me. Most of them I gathered from Matthew, himself."
>
"Why was my father important to you?"
>
"Keep looking."
>
Lee didn't waste more time arguing. He continued to turn the pages, curious now to learn a little of the man he had known so briefly. There were photos with other officers, American and British, photos taken through a window that were unclear, but he assumed were of his father and some woman . . .
>
"Lee, that has to be your mother," Amanda said with excitement. "Remember what she said in her diary to you?"
>
"You're probably right," Lee looked more closely at the hazy photos.
>
"Diary?" Chaucer asked, briefly startled from his stoic pose. "What diary?"
>
Lee turned to Amanda and smiled.
>
"Keep looking," he said to Chaucer with a defiant nod.

>
Chaucer smiled back at Lee indulgently.
>
Lee returned his attention to the book. "That's definitely my mother," Lee pointed her out to Amanda, "I don't recognize these other people . . . wait, that's Winston Churchill -- my father knew him? Hey, I think this is Emily . . . look, Amanda, is it? She never told me she knew my parents . . ."
>
Lee turned more pages. "This must be their wedding . . . I think I remember seeing this picture when I was a kid . . . I think this is my grandmother . . . I'm not sure . . ."
>
"There you are again," Amanda pointed to a photo of Matthew Stetson, standing on the porch of his home with an infant in his arms.
>
"Yeah," Lee sighed. "More family pictures . . . I wish I could remember this stuff . . . look, there's Emily again . . . could this older couple be my grandparents, this is the same woman from before . . . I wonder what happened to them . . . why wouldn't Emily have told

me she knew my parents?"

>
Lee stopped again at another copy of the same article detailing the car accident. This time the following page contained an obituary. That was followed by pictures from a funeral. Amanda stared at one of the young Lee. He stood apart from the other mourners, staring at the fresh graves. He looked so small and vulnerable. Amanda held him tightly again. She wished she could reach back and hold that small boy as tightly. No one else had.

>
Lee shuddered slightly as he closed the book. He thought he had put his feelings about his parents to rest, but these photos were dragging it all back out into the daylight. This was Chaucer's idea of a Christmas gift? Lee placed the green book on the table on top of the blue one and wrapped his arms around Amanda. It felt good to accept her comfort. It didn't matter that Chaucer was watching; he needed Amanda to help fight the monsters again.

>
Chaucer allowed them several moments, not interrupting their embrace. He sighed, once begun, he had to complete this, consequences be hanged.

>
"Lee," he called them back to him, gently, but insistently, "open the white book."

>
Lee extricated himself from Amanda's embrace and took out the remaining book. Amanda continued to rub his back gently as he leaned forward. He was grateful for the continued contact.

>
He opened the white book and saw the expected baby picture. He didn't recognize this one either, but he suspected he knew who this baby would grow up to be. This picture was flanked by a birth announcement printed in flowing script. Lee squinted to read the words: "Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Hamilton are pleased to announce the birth of their daughter, Jennifer . . ." Lee stopped and stared at Chaucer.

>
"Jacob . . . Hamilton?" Amanda asked.

>
"You're my grandfather." Lee stated flatly.

>
Chaucer nodded, maintaining eye contact with Lee as though his life depended on it. Lee's eyes bored into the older man's. The shutters were beginning to open. Lee was determined to force them all the way.

>
"Why did you leave me alone?!" Lee threw the words in Chaucer's face, not breaking eye contact. "You were there all along. You knew where I was. Why did you leave me with him?"

>
"Keep looking," Chaucer replied in a strained voice.

>
"No! Not good enough!" Lee nearly shouted. "I want an answer right now!"

>
"All right, you can watch your mother grow up later," Chaucer relented. "Turn to the last few pages. Do it, Lee," he added as Lee started to argue.

>
Lee did as instructed. Once again, he was looking at pictures from a funeral.

>
"This isn't their funeral . . ." Lee looked from one photo to another. "There's Dad and me . . . that's Mom standing next to . . . that's you, isn't it? . . . married in 1920, died 35 years later . . . this was your wife's funeral, my grandmother's funeral?"

>
Chaucer nodded. "She died less than three months before Jenny and Matt. You all stayed for a while, but you were starting school in September. And then we heard the rumors about Blackthorne. You all left. I never saw Jenny and Matt again.

>
"When they died, I was still mourning my wife. I couldn't bear the thought of seeing my daughter buried as well. I didn't even go to the funeral, Lee. I thought about you, but I had just lost my wife and my daughter and my son . . ." Jacob's words trailed off weakly.

>
"I had just lost my parents," Lee hissed. "Maybe we could have helped each other. Did you think of that?"

>
"Yes I did," Jacob Hamilton replied, "and I've thought of it every day since."

>
"Why didn't you do anything about it? Why did you leave me with the Colonel?" Lee's voice rose sharply, almost cracked, and then settled back into a dull monotone.

>
"I did do something about it. I'm doing something else about it now."

>
"What, you followed me, spied on me? I didn't even remember you existed." He gestured helplessly to the leather bound volumes arrayed on the table.

>
"Grief does things like that. Children are more resilient than adults."

>
"I'm 37 years old. Why spring this on me now?" Although Lee's words were devoid of evident emotion, Amanda detected a hint of concerned curiosity still laced with selfish defiance.

>
"I know how old you are, Lee. I was there when you were born."

>
"Why?"

>
"You know why," Jacob said softly. "You and Amanda have been using the same poor reasoning to justify your actions over the last year."

>
"This is a dangerous business we're in," Amanda recited woodenly. "Everybody's safer if nobody knows. You thought you were protecting Lee."

>
"I was protecting Lee," Jacob insisted, his eyes growing moist. "I had just lost the three people I loved most to this business. I wasn't about to lose my grandson, too."

>
"How did she die?" Lee asked.

>
"It doesn't matter now," Jacob said.

>
"I want to know," Lee insisted.

>
"Oh, yes, of course, and if the great Scarecrow wants to know a thing it will be known, won't it, my boy?" Jacob spat in a tone that was both accusatory and self-deprecating. He stood and began pacing in front of the tree, running a trembling hand through his thinning hair.

>
"You are my boy, you realize? I tried to keep Jenny out of this, too, but it didn't work. When Matt dragged her into the game she went willingly." Jacob paused in his pacing, shook his head ruefully, and looked at Lee imploringly. "Do you have any idea how I felt when I lost you to this business anyway?" He resumed his pacing, marking out the distance from the tree to the kitchen more rapidly with each turn. "There must be something in our blood that draws us to this. It's sickening. So many times I wanted to come here and shake you till you came to your senses. I thought about setting you up for failure several times so they'd boot you out. I'd have hated myself, but at least you would have been safe."

>
Jacob fell wearily back into his chair. "Instead, I sent Emily. I trust her. I should, I trained her. I sent her to watch you and direct you to Harry Thornton. Between them I knew they could train you to keep yourself as safe as possible."

>
"I guess it worked," Lee said, some of his anger and resentment fading.

>
"So far, my boy, so far."

>
"I don't plan on doing anything stupid," Lee said as he took Amanda's hand in his own. "I've got too much to live for. Besides, you're still around."

>
"You know very well that I am the exception, not the rule,"

Chaucer countered.

>
"Jacob," Amanda said softly as she reached out to take his hand as well, "I have it on good authority that exceptional runs in this family. We know the risks; we're as careful as we can be."

>
"Those of us who take the risks are entitled to every bit of joy life has to offer, my dear. Don't waste a moment of it," Jacob cautioned.

>
"I seem to recall a relative of ours saying something very similar a long time ago," Amanda turned and smiled at her husband. "I'm glad he's finally ready to act on it."

>
Lee smiled weakly and kissed Amanda on the cheek.

>
"You still haven't told me why you came to me now," Lee said warily to Chaucer.

>
Jacob looked from Lee to Amanda.

>
"She's why. When I learned you'd gotten married, I thought you might leave the business. When that didn't happen and you were obviously keeping your relationship secret, I could see you falling into the same trap I'd laid for myself. I should have been there for you, Lee. I am profoundly sorry that I wasn't." The old man sighed, and captured Lee's gaze firmly again. This time Lee felt certain that Chaucer was the one who found himself wanting.

>
"And . . . I thought if I could put this to you just right, you would understand and give me the chance to make it up to you. Or at least the chance to do right by your children." Jacob looked from one to the other again.

>
"There will be children, won't there?"

>
"Well, we . . . uh . . ." The question caught Lee completely off-guard. He didn't want to answer for Amanda and they hadn't really talked about children since before the 'mystery marriage' idea. He looked at her, trying to read her expression. After nearly five years together, he thought he knew all her expressions, but this one was new to him.

>
"Jacob Hamilton," Amanda scolded gently, "you're as bad as my mother's going to be, once she gets used to the idea of Lee and I getting married." A baby, she thought. A baby with Lee. She really hadn't given it much thought. Between work and wedding secrets, keeping her life so segmented, it hadn't even been a possibility. But maybe now.

>
Yes, that could be very good.

>
"I'm sure we'll make that happen eventually," Amanda looked at Lee to be certain she hadn't overstepped herself. His smile was all the response she needed.

>
"Just don't be too long about it, children. Even I won't live forever," Jacob quipped, drawing new confidence from their unguarded response.

>
"What now?" Lee asked tentatively.

>
"Now, my boy, you take me back to my hotel. I'll be here for the remainder of the week. I'd like to get to know you both much better, if you'll permit me. Then, as soon as possible, you come visit me in London, and bring those fine boys of yours, and," he smiled, "anyone else who happens to come along between now and then."

>
~~~~~/\~~~~~

>
Lee returned home. Yes, this is home, he thought, shortly after returning his grandfather to his hotel. That idea is going to take some getting used to. He grinned triumphantly as he pulled into the driveway. He walked to the back door and peered through the window. Amanda was still up, cleaning in the kitchen. He smiled broadly as he watched her, of course she'd want it to be perfect Christmas morning. Forgoing his key, Lee tapped softly on the window. Amanda turned in

surprise.

>
"Hi," he said as she opened the door for him.

>
"Hi, yourself," she said as she circled her arms around his neck and kissed him.

>
Lee was not going to argue with her. He wrapped his arms tightly around her and deepened the kiss. Amanda squirmed out of his embrace after a few minutes.

>
"We can't," she told him, pushing him back.

>
"Yes, we can," he said reaching for her, "we did before. Where's that whipped cream?"

>
"Lee, no, absolutely not," Amanda turned her back on him, but he encircled her from behind, trailing soft kisses from her ear to her shoulder. As his hands reached for the buttons on her blouse, Amanda caught them and firmly pushed them to her sides. His kisses were still intoxicating, but she was not going to let his skillful hands distract her further.

>
"Lee, let me tell you about the fifteen cans of whipped cream .

. ."

>
 ~~~~~/\~~~~~

>
 Dotty woke in the middle of the night, consumed with curiosity. She made her way quietly down the stairs. Amanda and Lee were talking quietly in the kitchen. She couldn't quite make out their words.

Wedding plans, she hoped. Honeymoon plans, more likely, she thought.

She wouldn't bother them now. She crept silently to the closet in the foyer. There, on the shelf, was the gift Lillian had given to Amanda.

The gift that had embarrassed Amanda to no end. Dotty had to know

what it was. She pulled the box down from the shelf, removed the lid and stared at the dishtowel inside. She removed the dishtowel and saw the bottle of . . .

>
"Amanda!" she gasped in surprise.

>
"What is it, Mother?" Amanda's voice floated from the kitchen,

"Oh, no . . ."

>
 THE END

End

file.